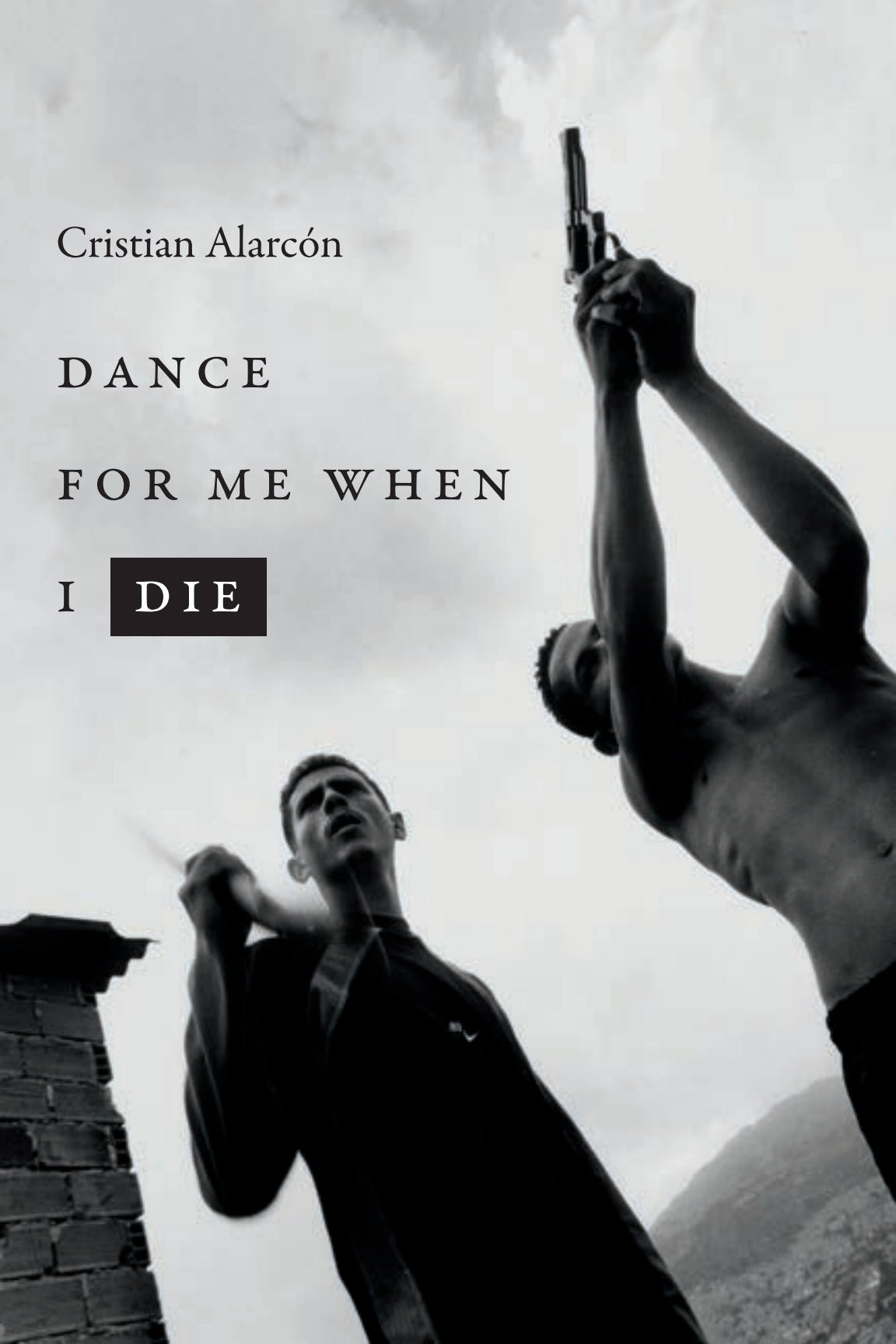
Cristian Alarcón

DANCE FOR ME WHEN I DIE



DANCE FOR ME WHEN I DIE

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DANCE FOR ME WHEN I DIE

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COVER ART: Alfredo Srur, photograph from the series *Geovany no quiere ser Rambo*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist.

To the Alarcón family · To the Casanova family

The traitor lives between two loyalties; he lives a double life, in disguise. He must pretend, remain in the wasteland of treachery, sustained by the impossible dreams of a future where his vile acts will at last be rewarded. But in what way will the vile acts of the traitor be rewarded in the future? —RICARDO PIGLIA, *Respiración artificial*

I call violence an audacity at rest but in love with dangers. It can be seen in a look, a way of walking, a smile, and you are the ones in whom it makes waves. It disconcerts you. This violence is a calm that disturbs you. —JEAN GENET, *The Thief's Journal*

What characterizes the concept of adventure and sets it apart from all the fragments of life . . . is the fact that something isolated and accidental may correspond to a need and contain a meaning. —GEORG SIMMEL, "The Adventure"

CONTENTS

FOREWORD · *Javier Auyero and Gabriela Polit-Dueñas*

Dance for Me When I Die was originally published in 2004 in Spanish—first in Argentina, and then in Chile and Colombia. Now in its thirtieth printing, it has become a mandatory text in high schools and colleges across Argentina and the object of numerous reviews and discussions. In vivid, luminous prose this book engages with topics that are at the forefront of political and cultural debates in contemporary Latin America: urban violence, marginality, youth, and precarity, to name just a few. Readers of the English version of this book will discover a slice of life in urban Latin America that has been the object of much misunderstanding—and not a few simplified representations. They will also, we believe, feel compelled to consider the merit of the *crónica* and the form's potential to narrate social life in its polychromatic dimensions.

During the first decades of the twenty-first century, most Latin American countries have witnessed an increase in urban violence; Latin America is the only region in the world that, without being at war, is experiencing an increase in lethal violence, as measured in homicide rates. This violence, analysts agree, is not evenly distributed across social and geographic space but is concentrated in territories where the urban poor dwell—known as

favelas, *barrios*, *comunas*, or *villas* in different countries of the subcontinent.[1] Journalists and scholars also agree that within these poor urban areas, different forms of violence (between family members, intimate partners, or community residents) converge and define the texture of everyday life. Social-scientific studies point to a number of factors associated with the ubiquitous violence in low-income neighborhoods: inequality, youth unemployment, the illicit drug trade, and the fragile legitimacy of the state's monopoly on violence. Many of these studies, however, still lack a thorough understanding of the uses and forms of such violence, of its lived experience, and of the ways in which both victims and perpetrators make sense of it.

Depictions of poor people's lives offered by the social sciences frequently condense entire, and quite diverse, categories (the urban poor, young poor men, poor women) to one or two salient portrayals (single mother, welfare recipient, sex worker, drug dealer, gang member). Sometimes with the author's best intentions or because of the imperative of making a more or less sophisticated social-scientific argument, these portrayals shrink complex and fluctuating lives to narrow explanations. Patricia Fernandez-Kelly summarized this tendency in straightforward terms for the case of studies of poverty in the United States: "Impoverished people in general and African Americans in particular have been reduced to flattened representations of social problems" (2015, 10).

In the Latin American literary tradition, crónicas—of the kind provided in this book—have attempted to overcome these simplifications by restoring complexity to the urban popular world (and to a great extent they have succeeded). Since its inception as a modern genre, the crónica has been a critical and unofficial political narrative that gives broader accounts of the region's tensions. Readers have encountered a combination of political criticism and aesthetically elaborated prose in the early depictions of modern cities, from the crónicas of José Martí, Julián del Casal, and Manuel Gutiér-

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1 The stratification of urban violence is hardly a Latin American phenomenon. "Rivalries between Chicago's increasingly splintered gangs and cliques over sales of heroin, Ecstasy, prescription drugs and marijuana have given way to gunfire," writes *New York Times* reporter Monica Davey (2016). Citywide, homicides increased 56 percent between 2015 and 2016, but "just five of Chicago's 22 police districts are driving the bulk of Chicago's rise." These are all in the poorest South and West Sides. The 11th district, located on the city's West Side, witnessed an 89 percent increase in homicides—ninety-one people were killed between January 1 and December 6, 2016.

rez Nájera, to Roberto Arlt's "Aguafuertes porteñas" and Salvador Novo's images of Mexico City, to the journalistic works of Gabriel García Márquez; from Rodolfo Walsh's denunciation of state brutality in the 1950s in Argentina to Elena Poniatowska's collective account of the student movement and massacre of Tlatelolco in 1968; from Alonso Salazar's appalling stories of Medellín's comuna dwellers to the crude realities of underground life in Pedro Lemebel's Santiago de Chile. And, of course, there is the great Carlos Monsiváis, who wrote about Mexico's underworld with the same passion with which he wrote about his country's countless political conflicts using a prose that masterfully expresses sophisticated ideas in a colloquial language. These crónicas combine ethnographic work, literary style, political denunciation, social analysis, and, in many cases, a close-up description of the forms and effects of violence.[2]

Readers familiar with Salazar's and Lemebel's work will find resemblances in *Dance for Me When I Die*. Like Salazar, Cristian Alarcón explores the predicament of young men who have normalized the fact that they will die early in life. These young men are being killed not only by state actors but also by other young men just like them. As with epic heroes, the familiarity with death, these *cronistas* tell us, does not prevent the young urban dwellers from being afraid of their tragic fate. To show the complexity of this quandary, Alarcón—like Lemebel—narrates the story in the language of these young men. Herein lies the uniqueness of the book into which you are about to delve: understanding the vernacular language of the *villa*—its rhythms and pauses, its graciousness and grotesque allusions, its humor and pain—places readers closer to the complex and heterogeneous lives of poor people in one of the most violent areas of Greater Buenos Aires. The work that Alarcón does with the local language shows that knowledge can build empathy.

Following in the literary tradition of García Márquez's *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, *Dance for Me When I Die* begins and ends with the death of Frente Vital—a local Robin Hood figure whose ethics and affective connections to the shantytown determine his life as a thief. Frente is already dead

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2 While the aestheticization of the real and the hybridity of the genre might make readers think of crónicas as *testimonios*, there are important differences between the two. The inception and expansion of modern crónicas has to be understood in relationship with the development of journalism in the region. Crónicas were also instrumental in the autonomization of the literary field; see Mahieux 2011, Ramos 1989, and Rotker 1992.

by the time Alarcón arrives at the villa, and yet the cronista places him at the center of his search. Conducting challenging fieldwork in the villa over more than eighteen months, Alarcón gathered testimonies from Frente's friends and foes, his lovers, his mother, and his siblings. In reconstructing Frente's life and death, Alarcón gives a profound account of the local culture. At the same time, he writes himself into the story and offers readers his own tentative discoveries of how villa dwellers act, think, and feel in the most dire of circumstances.

A storyteller rises up against the widespread indifference—and hostility—toward those living at the bottom of the Latin American sociosymbolic order and illuminates the lives, sufferings, and hopes of the wretched of the city. In so doing, Alarcón joins a long and respected tradition in the region's literary history.

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